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ABSTRACT

All dropouts from Hiawatha High School (Kirkland, Illinois) in the last 3 years were surveyed to determine why they dropped out and what the school could do to deter students from dropping out. Nationally, dropping out is related to poverty, lack of parental support, drug abuse, learning disabilities, and a history of poor school performance. Dropouts are most likely to be male, Hispanic, low-income, and from the South. Hiawatha had an annual enrollment of 150-200 students, of which 98 percent were White and 6 percent were low-income. Recent graduating classes contained 29-56 students. The 11 dropouts from the past 3 years expressed satisfaction with the school and attributed their inability to stay in school to their own personal situation or lack of effort. None had any suggestions for change that would have kept them in school. Of the 11, 4 had earned or were working on a diploma or GED. All were working or were in the military. The relationship of educational attainment to income is briefly discussed, as well as the possible relationship between dropping out and increases in the minimum wage. Recent changes at Hiawatha that may work to prevent dropouts include adoption of the 8-block (A/B days) scheduling model, increased student support services, a remediation program for grades 7-12, and after-school tutoring services. (Contains 19 references.) (SV)

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High School Drop Out Factors and Effects: An Analysis of a Small School in Rural Illinois

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Background:

Hiawatha High School is located in Kirkland, Illinois which is approximately 75 miles northwest of Chicago. Kirkland's population is 1000. There is minimal growth in commercial or residential construction. The community is primarily blue collar and farming. The school's annual enrollment fluctuates between 150 and 200 students. The student population is 98% white. 6.2% of the students come from low-income families. The attendance, mobility and chronic truancy rate are 94%, 12% and 1% respectively. Standardized test scores have been comparable with state and national averages.

Introduction:

Students that earn a high school diploma have a greater financial earning potential over their life span than students who dropped out of high school and did not receive a diploma or GED (general education development). This hypothesis makes the assumption that the majority of graduates would further their education by attending a two or four year college, technical/trade school or military opportunities. Students that voluntarily terminate their education prior to graduation seriously reduce their future opportunities. Furthermore, they often become a burden on their community. Statistics show that we, as a society, spend millions of dollars re-training dropouts in basic skills and that our prisons are filled with inmates who never completed their education (National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1987). Questions remain: Can students that drop out of high school experience a financially successful and enjoyable life? As educators, are we over-reacting concerning the drop out rate? If society is concerned about dropouts, who should be blamed for these students' failure and who is responsible to address the problem and make appropriate changes?

One of the goals of the Hiawatha C.U.S.D. #426 Board of Education was to survey Hiawatha High School dropouts from the past three years. Input was requested to determine if any curricular programs or student support services could have been added to deter the students from dropping out. This report analyzes the drop out trends, discusses the factors and effects for students that drop out, as well as list and explains action programs that have been implemented at Hiawatha High School that may help deter future students from dropping out.

Drop Out Rates:

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the nation's drop out rate has been coming down and has stabilized. In the 1995 edition of the Digest of Educational Statistics, the NCES reported that 10.5% of the population segment between the ages of 16 to 24 are high school dropouts, defined as persons who are not high school graduates and who are not enrolled in school (Fossey, 1996). A dropout is also defined as any student who moves out of the district and whose family did not request transcripts. A high school graduation rate is based solely on students receiving "regular" high school diplomas. High school completion rates usually count both students who receive regular diplomas and those who complete high school by means of an equivalency test, such as the GED (Hollinger, 1996). Research data is vague and tainted for comparison studies in the sense of defining "a dropout." Gaustad (1991) reports that the definition of a dropout varies widely, with different states, districts, and even schools within

districts using the term differently (Hollinger, 1996). There is a lot of conflicting data on dropouts, which include: States' minimum age for dropping out, earning a diploma versus earning a GED, and completion and noncompletion rates. It is difficult to react to the national drop out rate if data cannot be validated. Local districts are more likely to have their own valid data to study and track.

The number of students that drop out Hiawatha High School has varied in the last three years from a low of 2 in 1997-1998 to a high of 6 in 1996-1997. The graduation rate has also varied from a low of 72.50% during 1996-1997 to a high of 83.70% during 1995-Its important to note that Hiawatha's graduating class sizes range from 29 to 56 students.

Factors and General Data:

Nobody disputes the idea that numerous factors outside of school often drive a student to drop out – poverty, lack of parental support, single parent household, drug abuse and other abuses (Sherrow, 1996; Langenfeld & Cumming, 1996; Theis, 1997). Students are also at risk of dropping out due to the following in-school conditions: Learning disabilities, violence in school, fear of failing, poor attendance, school failure, grade retention, poor academic skills, unfair treatment, low self-esteem, lack of a significant adult in their life, peer pressure, irrelevant classes, low academic expectations from teachers, and few successes in school (Headden, 1997; Sherrow, 1996; Langenfeld & Cumming, 1996; Bracey, 1996; National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1987; McDill, Natriello & Pallas, 1985).

A closer look at the general data show that males are more likely than females to drop out (55 percent to 45 percent). Hispanic students are at greater risk of dropping out than white students (12.4 percent to 4.5 percent). Black students are slightly more likely than white students (6.4 percent to 4.5 percent). Together, low and middle-income families comprise 90 percent of the dropout population. Data from different regions of the country is impacted by the makeup of the population and the size of the region, of course, but the South has the highest drop out rate (43.9 percent of all U.S. dropouts), followed by the West (28.1 percent), the Midwest (18.2 percent) and the Northeast (9.9 percent) (Hopkins, 1997).

Dropout Survey:

I was able to contact all the Hiawatha High School dropouts from the last three years. Most of the dropouts expressed satisfaction with school and attributed their inability to stay in school to their own personal situation or lack of effort. No one felt that the course work was too difficult. Also, none of the dropouts had any suggestions for change that would have kept them in school. Listed below, in order of the year they dropped out, are their reasons for dropping out, their current employment status, and their high school completion status.

- Not enough credits, working, earned GED
- Not enough credits, working, earned diploma
- Pregnant, working, no GED
- Dropped before being expelled, working, no GED
- Not enough credits, working, no GED

- Pregnant, working, no GED
- No motivation/inherited money, working, no GED
- Not enough credits, working, considering GED
- Not enough credits, working/junior college, no GED
- Not enough credits, working/junior college, working on GED
- Not enough credits, military, earned GED

Drop Out Implications and Effects:

The long term economic implications for dropouts are and continue to be bleaker. In today's economy, low skill jobs are not as prevalent as they were twenty years ago, and they do not pay as well. The following excerpt was given by Dr. Kent Johansen, District Superintendent of Meridian C.U.S.D. #223, at Stillman Valley High School's 1997 graduation commencement exercise:

> "Median real incomes in 1995 were essentially the same as in 1973. The economic pie has not grown in two decades. In constant 1993 dollars, median annual earnings for males since 1973 have increased only for those with postgraduate education. During the same period, women in all categories, except for dropouts, have made gains, but only those with college or postgraduate education have enjoyed substantial increases. These contrasts in income levels during the past two decades can be stark: Earnings for male high school dropouts have dropped from $25,673 to $17,000 while earnings for those with postgraduate education have risen from $44,000 to $53,000."

It is clear that in today's high-tech job market, the high school dropout pays a huge price for not completing a high school program. Students that choose to drop out usually seek a low-level part or full-time job. Many jobs available to dropouts pay minimum wage. Stuart Landon, an associate professor of economics at the University of Alberta, was puzzled that most research into drop out rates focuses on the quality of the classroom experience (and hence most solutions favor more spending on teachers, schools and supplies), while in surveys that actually involve talking to dropouts, the most frequently given reason for leaving school was financial. So Landon decided to dig deeper into the link between education and employment. What he found was a powerful connection between the minimum wage and the drop out rate (Taylor, 1997). "Increases in the minimum wage are shown to have a significant negative effect on the enrollment rates of 16 and 17 year old males and 17 year old females," he writes in the June 1997 issue of Canadian Public Policy. His calculations suggest that for every $.50 increase in the minimum wage, the number of 16 and 17 year olds in school falls by almost 1% (Taylor, 1997).

Youths living in families at the highest income levels were the least likely to drop out of high school, compared with young adults from families with low incomes who were eight times more likely to drop out. Correspondingly, nearly 97 percent of the youngsters from families at high income levels completed high school, compared with about 73 percent of the youths from low income families (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1995).

Americans are too poorly educated to compete in our high-tech economy (Wolk, 1999). Is society encouraging students to drop out by luring them with a "financial carrot?" If students drop out, what is their motivation for returning to school or completing a high school program? Researchers found that, while GED holders did indeed garner no higher wages initially after obtaining a GED, their salaries increased at a faster rate over the next few years than did those of dropouts without a GED
(Bracey, 1995).

Analysis of Hiawatha High School:

It is very easy and convenient for schools to be blamed for their educational programs leading to the students' lack of success. Hiawatha is not immune from this mentality. Prior to the 1999-2000 school year, Hiawatha operated on a traditional eight periods a day schedule. Class offerings were limited due to being a small high school, with an enrollment of 175. The size of the school enrollment is related to curricular offerings as well as the extracurricular activities (Alspaugh, 1997). One of the strategies that some schools use to reduce their drop out rates is to increase their course offerings, on the theory that the more courses schools offer, the more likely it is that students will find courses to match their interests and stay in school (Alspaugh, 1998). Another common drop out prevention strategy is for schools to expand vocational course offerings, though there is little relationship between student participation in vocational courses and dropping out of school (Alspaugh, 1997). In February, 1999 the Hiawatha Board of Education adopted the 8-Block (A/B days) scheduling model and implemented it during the 1999-2000 school year. The number of course offerings did not change. The block schedule reduced the number of classes that a student attended each day and reduced the amount of work needed to be done on a daily basis. The schedule also includes the concept of "guided practice" which allows students to start on homework with a teacher present to insure that the homework is started correctly and successfully. The block schedule also allows additional time for teachers to get to know and personalize their relationship with students. It takes time for students and teachers to develop a close working relationship (Alspaugh, 1997). Because Hiawatha High School's change in philosophical strategy for scheduling and time utilization during the school day is so recent, data is not yet available to indicate how it will affect the drop out rate.

Hiawatha increased the student support services in 1998 by hiring a full-time social worker and speech therapists. These two joined a full-time nurse and guidance counselor, along with the two principals and superintendent that make up the student support services team. This team meets once a month to discuss current projects, students, and proactive issues. This team will continue to look for ways to address and meet the needs of all students, especially students "at-risk."

Another recent change at Hiawatha is the implementation of a grade 7-12 remediation program. This program is designed to identify students "at risk" or that just need a little assistance getting back on track. Students that "do not meet" on standardized tests and have a failing grade in a core course, must attend weekly after-school tutoring sessions for a minimum of nine weeks. Additionally, summer school and after-school programs have been introduced to help students stay academically in line for graduation. Finally, students that do not pass at least

two of the four core courses in junior high are retained for another year. A student retained in a grade is 11 times more likely to drop out than one promoted regularly (Bracey, 1996). This should be taken into consideration; however, the amount of student support services hopefully will provide enough assistance for students to be successful and not drop out.

School climate is also a factor that can contribute to students' success or reason for dropping out. Many of the academic program changes at Hiawatha are based on the assumption that all students can succeed. As principal, I make a point to be sensitive to our climate so that it is warm, friendly, and geared toward student success. Although it is difficult to quantify school climate, I feel our climate supports student success.

Hiawatha also provides many incentive programs for students to feel good about school and themselves. Each quarter soft drinks are provided during homeroom for students that had perfect attendance or did not receive any disciplinary referrals. Also, cinnamon rolls are provided for students on the honor roll each quarter. Students-of-the-month and all nominees are invited to attend a principal's luncheon at Pizza Hut held at the end of each quarter. Finally, students with good attendance (90%) receive free Rockford Lightning tickets (a local C.B.A. basketball team).

If extracurricular participation is some measure of climate, during the past five years 72% of Hiawatha's students participated in at least one activity. Pittman (1991) found that the social climate and participation in athletics to be important factors in student retention (Alspaugh, 1997). Students that participated in activities at Hiawatha had less disciplinary referrals, as a whole than students that did not participate. It should also be noted that four of the nine students that dropped out of Hiawatha in the past three years did participate in athletics.

Conclusion:

Secondary school students who drop out of school are put at great social and economic disadvantage. If potential dropouts can be identified early, prevention may be possible (Curtis, 1983). It is important to note the causes of dropping out and the effects on high school dropouts because schools are charged with the responsibility of educating all of its students. I am of the opinion that schools owe it to their communities to do everything they can to make all children successful. However, parents must also do their part in raising, educating and guiding their children. Ultimately it the responsibility of the students themselves to get the job done. Students must understand, when it comes to their education and their financial future that failure is not an option.

Further research at the local level would be beneficial to Hiawatha's current and future programs. Given the statistics on income and education, we can safely conclude that those who are dropping out are those who can least afford to do so (Bracey, 1994).

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